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Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines
Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will also be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: review_editor@platypus1917.org. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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organs of capitalism. What was needed was independent
tions had become bureaucratic and reactionary. They were
-ensure the thereby that revolutionary Marxism remained in
a means to lift the level of mass consciousness and to
in China as had happened in the Soviet Union, and as
both a necessity to avoid the restoration of capitalism
As for the Cultural Revolution, we understood it as
sponded to our disenchantment with the Soviet Union.
participatory democracy or spontaneism. These corre-

from it in the fifties.
back to Marxism for those of us who had drifted away
other elements I have mentioned, Maoism was a way
command. By combining the Marxist tradition with these
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“All peoples of the world come together in solidarity to smash American imperialism, Soviet revisionism, and all adversaries of the Revolution!” Image printed in China, 1971, by the People’s Fine Art Publishing House.



derived from their skin color in order to forge unity be-
lay in getting white workers to repudiate the privileges
revolutionaries who wanted to mobilize the working class
that argued that the major task of American communist
it to fail. The first was the “white skin privilege” doctrine
was the two central doctrines that defined it as an organi-
had its peculiarities. It didn’t look to China very much. It
MR: The STO was, broadly, a Maoist organization, but it
towards Maoism?

expelled? Did you already at that time harbor misgivings
against the leadership of the STO and were eventually
SL: How was it that you and others came to form a faction

attached to this, anti-bureaucratism, a kind of Marxist
this country. Finally, there was a kind of left populism
China became a leading voice of anti-imperialism in
Moreover, they combined anti-imperialism with this.
of Vietnam, Cuba, etc., but China was the leading force.
fied with revolutionary nationalism. This was also true
dominant among the American New Left. They identi-
MR: Maoism combined the trends that had become
Revolution in China and how did they affect your way of
thinking?

did the New Left’s turn toward Marxism manifest to
such a large degree in a turn toward Maoism? What sort
of reports did you have of the Great Proletarian Cultural
Revolution in China and how did they affect your way of

What about the STO appealed to you at that time? Why
eventually splitting with its leadership in the mid-70s.
[STO] in which you were active for some years before
joined the Chicago-based Sojourner Truth Organization
SL: Turning towards Maoism by the late 1960s, you
New Left and the NCM.
the dominant system. This was the bridge between the
ist politics. We sought a more radical, deeper break with
ment. These drew us beyond social-democratic, reform-
was anti-imperialism occasioned by the anti-war move-
and other leading militant civil rights groups. The other
withdrawal of us white radicals from the center of SNCC
very much. This also was painful because it involved the
African-American movement—Black Power impacted us
tionalism emerging within the militant wing of the
was a strong identification with the revolutionary na-
Two new perspectives emerged in this period. One
demands of the Civil Rights movement.
had been a progressive Democrat, responsive to the
cratic Party position. This was painful because Johnson
broke from “part of the way with LBJ” to an anti-Demo-
Luther King, were moving in a similar direction, but SDS
the issue of the war. Many in the movement, even Martin
Democratic Society [SDS] from the Democratic Party on
moment was the break in that year of Students for a
expelling that state’s racist delegation. The second key
National Convention. Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mis-
Rights movement, having undertaken a massive mobi-
lization of black voters, was rebuffed by the Democratic
in the summer of 1964 when the radical wing of the Civil
Two experiences of that era stand out. The first was
ology.
popular mobilization while eschewing hard Marxist ide-
which were radical, social-democratic and interested in
The New Left reflected well our politics at the time.
us back into political activism and created the New Left.
These drew
with the Soviet Union. What brought us out of this were
ideological bind between Marxism and disillusionment
of us were politically passive. We were trapped in an
in consequence, throughout the early fifties many
speech. Mainly it confirmed in me my father’s doubts.
I don’t recall being totally shocked by Khrushchev’s
with his comrades. He greatly influenced my views.
revelations but had never totally broken his connection
become disillusioned with the CP prior to Khrushchev’s

a labor organizer and a mid level CP cadre who had been
state aspects of the Soviet Union. My father had been
the Left with Stalin and the bureaucratic and the police-
marked a great disillusionment among a broad layer of
cause we were young. Still, the period of McCarthyism
were often harassed and oppressed, we were not be-
wasn’t purely a question of oppression—our parents
Also I came of age in the McCarthy period. This
ment posed by fascism.
the other towards the threat to the working class move-
one was to the labor movement and the working class,
tain political perspectives, viewpoints, and orientations;
we learned at our parents’ knee, this fostered in us cer-
Those informed the experience of our parents. And as
ties: the labor movement and the anti-fascist coalition.
ments of the “united front” of the late thirties and for-
ing class by and large, mostly in the two great move-
baby.” We were the children of socialist activists, work-
Like many of us in the New Left, I was a “red diaper
with many others.
about my background. It’s important because it’s shared
Mel Rothenberg: To answer that I have to say a bit

and the NCM?
ideological and organizational, between the New Left
ence was? What do you take to be the continuities, both
1960s and how representative do you think your experi-
determined your joining a Marxist organization in the
behind the New Communist Movement [NCM]. What
have a different perspective than him on the motivations
Committee [SNCC] in Chicago from 1961 onwards, you
as a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating
than Elbaum and having participated in the New Left
Communist movement in the United States. Being older
Communist movement in the New Left towards reconstituting the
pulse within the New Left towards reconstituting the
emergence, by the late 1960s, of the widespread im-
comrade of yours, Max Elbaum. There I discussed the
new published an interview I conducted with a former
Spencer Leonard: Last December the *Platypus Re-*

On January 31, 2011, Spencer A. Leonard interviewed Mel Rothenberg, author of *The Myth of Capitalism Reborn: A Marxist Critique of Theories of Capitalist Restoration in the USSR to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of American Maoism in the 1970s. The interview was aired on the radio show Radical Minds on WHPK–FM Chicago, on February 1. What follows is a revised and edited transcript of the interview.*

Overcoming bourgeois right
An interview with Mel Rothenberg

Spencer A. Leonard

Bourgeois right, continued from page 1

worker organization. This idea was taken from Gramsci, who developed it in his initial period of activism in Turin before the First World War. The leaders of STO argued that we were in a similar position to the Turin’s workers movement when it was moving beyond social-democratic reformism and class collaboration to a period of intense class struggle that would challenge the very foundations of bourgeois rule. For us to make a similar transition we had to transcend trade union hegemony over the working class.

Those two doctrines distinguished the STO on the Left. And as an organization they were serious, not least when it came to working class organizing. They were never a large organization but almost all their cadres worked in industry. I was one of the few that was not actually a factory worker and I was only allowed to join because I knew Mike Goldfield, who was already in and was working in a factory. They made an exception for me, but I was always somewhat marginal for that reason.

By the mid-1970s a number of us began to see the limitations of the organization’s positions. For instance, “white skin privilege” was not, unsurprisingly, a position around which it was easy to organize white workers. After all, workers are uninterested in giving up what little they have because they supposedly haven’t earned it. It also led to fights with unions that were not healthy. We opposed the union leadership not on broad democratic grounds by demanding more honest and effective unions, but simply the on the grounds that unions were by their nature compromised organizations. This too did not sit well with politically conscious workers.

SL: Your criticisms of both of these two STO lines were given added salience at the time by an upsurge of union activity?

MR: The seventies were indeed a period of working class militancy. There was the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement in Detroit (DRUM) led by black workers with whom we had some connection. African-American workers had begun to form caucuses in unions and in certain plants. Also among the miners, steelworkers, and others there were oppositional caucuses critical of the union leaderships.

As for the STO’s Maoism, it was reflected in a kind of syndicalism, pushing for spontaneous workers’ uprisings. Our image of the Cultural Revolution as a series of actions where the workers took over the factory and met to discuss at great length topics such as bourgeois degeneration fit with our own syndicalist spirit. Still, our ties with Maoism were relatively superficial as opposed to other groups.

SL: When you finally broke with Maoism it took the rather dramatic form of a book-length refutation of the Maoist line that defined the Three Worlds Theory that appealed to so many. This was the claim that capitalism had been restored in the USSR, that it was engaged in a kind of imperialism. You have since referred to the book you wrote refuting this position, *The Myth of Capitalism Reborn*, co-written with Michael Goldfield, as a “settling [of] accounts with [my] Maoist past.”¹ Explain the capitalist restoration thesis and the attraction it exerted on your generation.

MR: The Chinese position was that a new bourgeoisie had developed in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev. They had gained control over the Communist Party (CPSU) to restore capitalism in a kind of bloodless coup. When China broke with the USSR and entered into a tacit alliance with the West it declared the Soviet Union the main enemy. They needed a theoretical reason why they would side with a capitalist power against a socialist power. Their initial assertion was that the USSR, through great power chauvinism, had adopted social-imperialism. This was followed by the deeper claim that the USSR had degenerated to a fully capitalist state. The order of this supposed development was important and shrewdly articulated because the initial claim played into the growing anti-imperialist sentiment around the world, and in particular to the growing Maoist movement in the U.S. The emphasis on social-imperialism initiated the sharp break with the traditional communist movement at the hottest flashpoint of conflict. Finally, the declaration that capitalism had been fully restored in the USSR made the break total and irreversible.

The theoretical basis of their analysis was very opportunistic and superficial. It followed a split that, in hindsight, was driven by nationalism and geo-political power conflict. The Chinese had a legitimate fear that the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence with imperialism was designed to isolate them internationally. They also had legitimate concerns about how well the Soviet industrialization strategy would work in their conditions. Instead of developing a line to confront these real problems they tried to develop a position that would thrust China into the leadership of what they saw as a growing international communist movement critical of the Soviet Union, while at the same time justifying the cynical anti-Soviet alliance with the U.S. There was absolutely no chance of realizing these two contradictory aims. The smarter Chinese leaders must have known this. But, of course, the western Maoist movement lapped this stuff up, embracing this thesis with more enthusiasm than the Chinese ever did.

SL: Is this related to the narrative you gave before about the long experience of the New Left?

MR: We were trying to settle accounts with the Communist Party and the Old Left. By 1968, the developments in France in May, and the role the Communist Party played in them, not to mention the invasion of Czechoslovakia, gave added impetus to people already prepared to embrace this position. As a line, it was simple and direct, and many simply accepted it. It allowed them to silence their doubts as to why the New Left and the working class weren’t hand in hand everywhere in the world. What eventually prompted some of us to break with it in the mid-seventies were mainly the actions of the Chinese themselves, particularly in Angola. There, after the collapse of the fascist regime in Portugal and their abandonment of their erstwhile colonies, the Chinese opposed the left government to support Jonas Savimbi and UNITA, whereas the Soviets supported the opposition through their Cuban allies. The Chinese

also supported the Shah of Iran, refusing to endorse the movement against him, in consequence of which a broad layer of Maoists began to question Chinese leadership. But Mike [Goldfield] and I explored the actual theoretical basis of the capitalist restoration thesis. Our initial substantive theoretical criticism was that the Chinese position implied that, though they couldn’t point to an actual capitalist class, there was a collective capitalism in the Soviet Union, that the bureaucracy constituted a capitalist collective leading the country back to capitalism. We felt this was incompatible with a Marxist conception of capitalism, which intrinsically involves competition among capitalists. You couldn’t have capitalism without capitalist competition, which was part of the essence of capitalism. This insight initiated our thoroughgoing critique of the thesis of the restoration of capitalism in the USSR.

In this country a single Maoist theoretician was most influential. This was Martin Nicolaus, the translator of the *Grundrisse*. Nicolaus was a theoretically sophisticated Marxist who joined the October League, which in turn eventually entered the CP(M-L), one of two major Maoist groups in this country along with the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). He elaborated the capitalist restoration line in a number of articles in the 1970s, in which he tried to remain a kind of classical Marxist, but our own belief was that to do so required significant distortions of Soviet reality. For instance, on Nicolaus’s view, Khrushchev had imposed nothing short of a “regime of economic terrorism” on the working class through privatizations, semi-privatizations, and the development of a kind of wholesale market. Economic planning had been covertly undermined and enterprise managers had emerged as effective owners of the means of production. Thus they constituted a new, if legally unacknowledged, capitalist class. On the basis of isolated instances and sketchy data, he also argued that unemployment existed on a large scale in the USSR on account of the re-commodification of labor. Because Nicolaus argued that capitalism’s restoration was an ongoing economic process, he was compelled to exaggerate the social upheaval it occasioned in the form of unemployment, slowdowns and strikes, firings, and the imposition of stricter labor discipline.

SL: So, Nicolaus was addressing and perhaps rationalizing the exigencies of the situation. Because China had been aligned with Stalin until his death, the USSR must have been a revolutionary socialist society till then. Accordingly, even though workers in the Soviet Union were actually enjoying by the 1960s substantially increased levels of consumption, more amenities, social security, education, benefits, etc., Nicolaus nevertheless had to describe that situation in terms of the restoration of capitalism. Was that the tension you pressed Nicolaus on?

MR: Yes. Nicolaus identified as a sign of capitalist restoration any leisure or consumer goods the workers enjoyed, as well as any social differentiation, which, of course, also existed under Stalin. To do this he had to distort the facts.



¹“Throw Out the Wang-Zhang-Jiang-Yao Anti-Party Clique!” Anti-Gang of Four poster from the late 1970s.

SL: You also argued in the book that Charles Bettelheim had to change the idea of what capitalism is in order to advance the capitalist restoration thesis. For Bettelheim, not only was capitalism compatible with “state ownership of the means of production, of central planning, and of other economic features commonly thought to be socialist,” but, rather than one of the necessary preconditions for the achievement of socialism, the suspension or abolition of private property and the market in the USSR served somehow only to obscure the perpetuation of capitalism. The Soviet Union therefore represented a post-bourgeois form of capitalism. While defenders of the USSR argued, “look, there are no capitalists making money in this market, so it is not capitalism,” Bettelheim replied, “but capitalism does not require that.” What was Bettelheim trying to get at with this counter-intuitive mode of arguing and what was the critical issue at stake in your criticism of him?

MR: As the head of the Franco-Chinese Friendship Association, Charles Bettelheim was the leading French Maoist thinker of the time. He didn’t resort to distorting the facts. Unlike Nicolaus, he was a real expert on the Soviet Union. But arguing the restoration thesis demanded that he fundamentally alter Marxist theory. Bettelheim accepted the position Mao enunciated in his left turn, when he was promoting the Cultural Revolution, that the key to building socialism turned on the line the party espoused. If it espoused a proletarian line, the revolution was advancing toward socialism. If it espoused a bourgeois line, no matter what the reality, the society was moving back to capitalism. For this reason, he did not view the restoration of capitalism in the USSR as a gradual process in the manner of Nicolaus. Whereas Nicolaus saw it as beginning with Stalin’s death in 1953 and culminating in Kosygin’s economic reforms of 1965, for Bettelheim, it was Khrushchev’s speech at the 20th Party Conference in 1956 that was decisive. The leadership’s plan, line, and practice determined the political

nature of society in the transition to socialism. The argument was not so much that capitalism had been restored but that the process of its overcoming had been halted by the leadership. Even the theoretical question of whether or not labor is a commodity was a matter of the prevailing political line. If the workers are working to advance socialism, it is not a commodity; if they are not, it is. The crucial issue was *why* the workers are working. Bettelheim did not look for the immediate abolition of wages. He did expect, however, that socialist workers’ primary motivation was to “build the society,” which he thought was happening in China. Bourgeois right and the value form were thus to be overcome politically. The claim, bolstered by a certain romantic conception of the Cultural Revolution, was that Chinese workers were engaged in ongoing struggles to increase their control over the instruments of production. By comparison, mundane considerations such as workers’ material consumption, labor conditions, or the overall economic level were secondary. This is a species of voluntarism still runs through a lot of the Left, not only Maoism.

SL: This goes back to the picture you gave before of Chinese factory workers holding political discussions late into the night during the Cultural Revolution. The essence of Marxism for Maoists hinged, it seems, on constant repoliticization, enthusiasm, and mobilization. Rather than raising the question of how you can build socialism in a peasant country, it really became about political process. Emancipation in this context looks like one long university sit-in.

MR: Exactly! That was in fact what many Maoists believed. Facts did not really matter. One could not argue against Maoism on a purely factual basis. We took aim at that. We also proposed a theory of transition, one not so different from that of the leading Trotskyist thinker Ernest Mandel. In fact, Mandel wrote us a letter saying that he admired our book. At any rate, the main importance of the book was our argument against Bettelheim.

Drawing on the *Grundrisse*, Bettelheim centered his argument on the value form, arguing that under communism labor time will no longer be the measure of wealth. In that state, the economy will be so developed and automated that the production of all the material needs of life will take only a small percentage of collective human time and energy. From this perspective, commodity production, and thus the reproduction of capitalism, could not simply be equated with private production for profit. As long as labor remained the measure of value and was appropriated as surplus value by a ruling elite, capitalism continued to dominate. Thus, in the USSR, capitalism took a non-market, non-private-property-based form. State ownership of the means of production, central planning, and other economic features of the USSR normally associated with socialism, actually masked the existence of capitalism. Though there was nothing resembling a labor market, labor was subordinated to the production of value, and value operated socially as the measure of wealth. Obviously, such arguments were intended to relativize the significance of the Bolsheviks’ seizure of state power and of the economic changes wrought by the October Revolution. But it is difficult to understand how, on the ground of what Marx calls “bourgeois right” (which Marx acknowledges will continue to prevail during the transition to socialism), the value form, as its fundamental expression, would not also persist, particularly given the stalling of the world revolution. Overcoming the value form and harnessing the full liberating capacity of science and automation to achieve a society of genuinely human wealth is a goal that no Marxist would dispute. What Bettelheim demanded was that this be achieved, or almost achieved, early in the transition to socialism. Otherwise, the society inevitably collapses back into capitalism.

Beyond these theoretical issues, the basic political question is whether or not we have something necessary to learn from understanding the Soviet experience and its ultimate failure to reach its goals. The approaches of Nicolaus and Bettelheim are ultimately dead ends in this respect. I would contend that the Left cannot advance out of its current impasse until this question is addressed more squarely and with greater honesty than many seem inclined to do today. The sort of unspoken consensus on the Left that it is better to forget and bury the Soviet experience, and move on to a more emancipatory vision of socialism, won’t work. To overcome the past, you must face it.

SL: In an article in the January 2011 issue of *Science & Society*, you argue against a certain conception of “worker control of the means of production,” which, as you point out, can mean a number of things. There you argue that many who demand workers’ control of the means of production are actually demanding that “workers in each enterprise collectively determine what is produced, how much is produced, and how it is produced,” and that this is not Marxist.² How does this represent an attempt to short-circuit the specifically *political* aspect of overcoming bourgeois right, and thus a kind of repeat of the Bettelheimian Maoism you criticized in your book?

MR: There are two aspects to this. One is Maoism’s influence on Bettelheim, and the other is a certain Trotskyist tradition visible today in groups like Solidarity, who have a kind of syndicalist approach and see democracy in the plant as the key site of struggle. That tradition goes back to anarchism and syndicalism of various sorts. It is a very attractive view because it allows one to entertain the prospect of socialism in one factory. It makes the achieving of socialism more manageable. There is some of this in Argentine syndicalism. You achieve workers’ control factory by factory. Once you do it in every factory, you have socialism. It attempts to address problems of alienation, autonomy, and democracy at the level of the individual factory. This is very tempting in a period when the Left lacks political organization, or even substantial political influence. It also has a certain demagogical appeal, in that organizing at the point of production makes it easier to talk to workers about socialism. It is easy to talk about how stupid the boss is and say, “We can run this place much better and fairer. We could get more production. We wouldn’t have to deal with these foremen and bosses who are just parasites.” This kind of thing is, of course, popular among workers, especially when they are angry. It is easy to agitate around. It’s a very deep tradition on the Left, one the Maoist legacy plays into. *Labor Notes* and Solidarity are two groups coming out of this tradition that do serious work organizing in factories. I don’t agree with it, but it is not a settled issue among Marxists.

SL: Trotskyism is obviously the tradition that insisted upon understanding the fraught political significance of the Soviet Union in terms of its historical character. In rejecting the Maoist line of capitalist restoration in the USSR, and describing the Soviet Union instead in terms of “process” and “protracted transition,” you arguably came close to a Trotskyist position, as Mandel’s approving letter seems to imply. How conscious were you and Goldfield, in the mid-1970s, of this? Were you actively reading Trotskyist works? If so, why did you never contemplate joining a Trotskyist organization, whether in the 1960s or later?

MR: My perspective is a little different from Goldfield’s. Both of us read a lot of Mandel’s works. Clearly we were influenced by his analysis, which goes back to Trotsky. But my problem with Trotskyism was twofold. First, the Trotskyist groups I knew to be doing serious work in plants and factories, groups like Solidarity, had what I have called a syndicalist orientation. I respected what they were doing, in terms of organizing workers. But the syndicalism was, nonetheless, always a problem for me. They had in fact adopted a more nuanced version of the position STO adopted toward trade unions. They were active in trade unions, but they would always form an oppositional bloc, refusing to work with the existing leadership. They would *never* work with them, as a matter of principle, considering them to be irredeemably corrupt and compromised. I felt that this was an ineffective way to organize workers.

SL: A Marxist position, in your view, entails intersecting workers in their own organizations that serve as their schools of politics?

MR: Right. The Marxist position requires working with trade unions. There may be corrupt or even tyrannical leaders, whom one would oppose, but in a way that respects that there is a structure and a leadership. The workers can choose a better leadership, but that involves a complex struggle. One cannot simply dismiss the existing leadership on the grounds that they are a bunch of corrupt opportunists and we have to do something *totally* different. This was an important political point against at least a certain wing of Trotskyism.

My problem with the other wing of Trotskyism, represented by groups like the ISO, is that they do not believe in the United Front. For me, the way to build a movement for socialism is to build a multi-class historic bloc. This does not mean that every class has the same role, or the same leadership, but it will include the middle class intelligentsia and many skilled professionals, the sort of people required to manage a modern industrial society. This is a protracted process. Trotskyists do not really believe in this and have a purely proletarian position. Their view is that you go in and you try to rile up the working class. It is like the old Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) line, “a single match can start a prairie fire.” Excite the working class to rebellion and then parachute in as a vanguard. Take over the leadership once the working class has attained a certain level of combativeness, then lead it toward revolution. That strategy has never worked.

SL: In your recent *Science & Society* article you write, “One of the great and sad lessons of the Soviet experience is that after 70 years of uninterrupted communist rule, the Soviet Union rather easily and quickly reverted back to a deformed but thoroughly capitalist society. The roots of the socialist order turned out to be weak and shallow.”³ How does this relate to your understanding of the wider collapse of the Left? After all, haven’t the roots of the socialist project proved weak and shallow worldwide? Does the Soviet experience not raise the question of the *self-defeat* of the Left?

MR: This is the key question. We are not going to get a serious Left until we confront the collapse of the Soviet Union. Broadly speaking, three explanations are usually offered. The first is basically the capitalist view, which is that any kind of socialism is incompatible with modern industrial society. It can’t work, and didn’t. The second position, which is the position of much of the old Communist Party Left, is that the conditions were just too harsh. The Soviet regime was born in the midst of crisis; there was a civil war, then there was famine; there were attacks from the outside; there was a second world war. We faced the continual hostility of the capitalist world and the working class of Russia was too backward to rise the to occasion. So, we had the right approach, but ran into a series of insuperable obstacles. There is a certain amount of truth to this, but I don’t think it an adequate explanation. For one thing, the conditions in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, when they held power, were much harsher than in the 1980s when they lost power. So the collapse was not directly rooted in the harsh conditions of people, or the hostility of the capitalist world.

My explanation would say that they went about it the wrong way. Building a socialist society cannot occur primarily through a party state, which is what they did in the Soviet Union. The motive force was the party apparatus, and the entire project of building socialism was concentrated in it. The masses of people were told to shut up and work, and leave the socialism question to the party. That was the dominant position and practice in the Soviet Union. But socialism cannot be built by a political apparatus, which inevitably stagnates, has its own parochial interests, preoccupies itself with its own retention of power, and cannot in itself lead this kind of project. You need to have, as Gramsci put it, a historic social bloc committed to the socialist project that is much broader than a party-state apparatus. There are of course difficult questions of class relations, the hegemony of the working class, governance of the state, the structure and nature of a political party representing a broad social bloc, involvement in electoral and more revolutionary forms of struggle, etc., all of which can only be resolved over a long period of practice and struggle. In the Soviet experiment they tried to short-circuit these issues through the dictatorship of the party-state apparatus. It ultimately precipitated their failure. | **P**

Transcribed by Alex Gonopolskiy and Ryan Hardy

1. Mel Rothenberg, “Some Lessons from the Failed Transition to Socialism,” *Science & Society* 75:1 (January 2011): 114.
2. Ibid., 118.
3. Ibid., 117.

To the shores of Tripoli: Tsunamis and world history

Chris Cutrone



United States Navy Lieutenant Stephen Decatur and his men from USS Enterprise attacking the Barbary pirate ketch Mistico on December 23, 1803, painting by Dennis Malone Carter (1827–81).

“**AFTER ME, THE DELUGE,**” the saying attributed to Louis XV (1710–74), would have been better said by his son and heir Louis XVI, who was soon thereafter overthrown by the French Revolution that began in 1789.¹ Muammar Qaddafi has said something similar, that if he is overthrown Libya will be condemned to chaos. Qaddafi even claims to be fighting off “al-Qaeda.” Perhaps he is.

On the one hand, this is all clearly self-serving on Qaddafi’s part. On the other hand, the kernel of truth in such a statement, specifically with regard to Libya, might bear scrutiny.

The U.S. administration that attacked Libya before Obama was that of Ronald Reagan. Reagan’s foreign policy advisor and United Nations ambassador, Jeane Kirkpatrick, famously distinguished between “authoritarian” and “totalitarian” dictatorships, and thought that the U.S. should support the former and oppose the latter because of the relative ease with which the former could transition to democracy as opposed to the latter, whose pathology ran deeper, and so the effects would prove more lasting obstacles to freedom.

The comparison of Libya to its neighbor Egypt in the recent uprising against Mubarak seems to prove Kirkpatrick’s point. Egypt seems poised on a relatively painless transition to democracy, while Libya portends a much darker future, with or without Qaddafi. One might also, for good measure, point out the more intractably “totalitarian” tyranny of the political regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose potential democratic replacement is also highly uncertain, not least because its Islamic Revolution in 1979 was “democratic” in ways that the origins of the Egyptian or Libyan regimes were not.

Back in the 1980s, another famous dictator who was toppled, Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, warned that if his “New Society” was overthrown it would mean only the return of the traditional oligarchy of wealthy families, to the detriment of the people. While the Philippines today is certainly more politically democratic, and in this sense “free,” than under Marcos, his prediction has come spectacularly true. The Philippines today is ruled by its tradi-

“Tripoli” continues below

Attention to theory

A letter to the editor of *Under the Banner of Marxism*

Leon Trotsky

On the occasion of the launch of a new theoretical journal in 1922, Under the Banner of Marxism (Pod Znamenem Marksizma), Lenin singled out the open letter that Trotsky had written to the editors in the first issue, while expressing the hope that the venture would take the shape of a “society of materialist friends of Hegelian dialectics.” Trotsky himself underscored the importance of the letter in The Stalin School of Falsification (1937), which, in pointing to the difference between the changed conditions of education of the younger members of the party from that of their older comrades, outlined the necessity of a new theoretical approach in order to safeguard the theoretical and political experience accumulated within the party. Despite the importance attributed to the letter by Lenin and Trotsky, Leszek Kolakowski, in his Main Currents of Marxism, considered the letter unexceptional.

As the first in an experimental new series of original translations, the Platypus Review is delighted to be publishing the first English translation of this important letter by Trotsky.

Dear comrades!

The idea of publishing a magazine that would introduce advanced proletarian youth into the circle of materialist ideology seems to me highly valuable and fruitful.

The older generation of worker-communists that is now playing a leading role in the party and the country, awoke to conscious political life 10, 15, 20, or more years ago. That generation’s thought began its critical work with the policeman, the timekeeper, and the foreman, then rose to tsarism and capitalism, and then, most often in prison and exile, proceeded onto questions of the philosophy of history and scientific understanding of the world. Therefore, before the revolutionary proletarian reached the critical questions of the materialist explanation of historical development, it managed to accumulate a certain amount of ever-widening generalizations, from the particular to the general, based on its own life’s combat experience. The current young worker wakes up in the atmosphere of the soviet state, which itself is a living critique of the old world. Those general conclusions, that the older generation of workers acquired in battle and were fixed in consciousness by strong nails of personal experience, are now received by the younger generation of workers in finished form, directly from the state in which they live and from the party that governs that state. This means, of course, a giant step forward in terms of creating conditions for further political and theoretical education of the workers. But at the same time that this incomparably higher historical level is achieved by the work of older generations, new problems and challenges

appear for young generations.

The soviet state is a living negation of the old world, its social order, personal relationships, views, and beliefs. But, at the same time, the soviet state itself is still full of contradictions, holes, inconsistencies, vague fermentation—in short, the phenomena in which the legacy of the past intertwines with the germs of the future. In such a deeply fractured, critical, and unstable era as ours, education of the proletarian vanguard requires serious and reliable theoretical foundations. It is necessary to arm a young worker’s thought and will with the method of the materialist worldview so that the greatest events, the powerful tides, rapidly changing tasks, and methods of the party and state do not disorganize his consciousness and do not break down his will before the threshold of his independent responsible work.

Arm the will and not only the thought, we say, because, in the era of great world upheavals, now more than ever before our will cannot break, but must harden only if it rests against the scientific understanding of the conditions and causes of historical development

On the other hand, it is precisely in such a critical era as ours, especially if it drags on—i.e., if the pace of revolutionary events in the West proves slower than hoped for—that attempts of various idealist and semi-idealist philosophical schools and sects will likely possess the consciousness of young workers. Captured unaware by the events—without prior extensive experience of practical class struggle—the thought of young workers could be defenseless against various doctrines of idealism, which are essentially translations of religious dogma into the language of pseudo-philosophy. All of these schools, despite the diversity of their idealist, Kantian, empirio-critical, and other designations, in the end agree that consciousness, thought, knowledge prefaces matter, and not vice versa.

The task of materialist education of worker youth is to reveal the fundamental laws of historical development. And the most important and primary of these foundations is the law which states that human consciousness represents not a free and independent psychological process, but a function of material economic foundation, i.e., is determined by it and serves it.

The dependence of consciousness on class interests and relations, and the latter on economic organization, is manifested most brightly, openly, and crudely in the revolutionary era. On its irreplaceable experience, we must help young workers fasten in their minds the foundations of the Marxist method. But this is not enough. Human society itself has both its historical roots and its current economy in the natural-historical world. One must see in the man of today a link in the entire development,

Postcolonialism, continued from page 2

the wall and shooting. I do not consider it progressive anymore, if it ever was, to justify violent insurrection on the basis that the state was not going to fall on its own. Fanon said the same thing in the context of postcolonial struggles, which despite his call for a break from Europe unfortunately often followed the same model as the Old Left.

CM: So the postcolonial paradigm is really the only place to look to, right now?

SBM: The postcolonial moment entailed shifts in culture and in politics—but in economics, I’m not so sure. There is no doubt that the global economy is totally out of control and is not going to rectify itself. I would make a distinction between the market and capital, here. Even the market is destroyed by capital.

So I find the critique of global capital convincing, but I’m not sure how the political converges with capitalism. There is a huge problem in how to bring together a critique of the global economy with politics and culture without the working class being the hinge that does it—because, as we discussed earlier, I don’t think that can work.

CM: What do you think the role of leadership would be in these nonviolent movements? In particular, what do you think the intellectual’s role is globally with respect to them?

SBM: As far as leaders go, Rashid al-Ghannushi is an interesting figure. Tunisian-born, an early proponent of militant Islam, he lived in European exile until he came back to Tunis a few days ago. What’s going to be the role he plays? With President Obama you could see it coming: As soon as he took office, the power in the U.S. was going to be his worst enemy. He’s trapped in it. He can’t be the kind of leader he might have been. He is lost now.

Although I don’t agree with everything he says, more of us should take a cue from Slavoj Žižek. Recently I saw him being interviewed with Tariq Ramadan by al-Jazeera.³ More intellectuals need to get out on such a split screen. We should be brave enough to stand there in the naked immediacy of the political situation, rather than cloaking ourselves in academic scholarship before we dare to speak.

CM: So you are saying that more public debate and dialogue are necessary, so that contesting views could challenge each other in public?

SBM: But in order to show that they are not contesting. Identity politics would not have imagined them in the same place, but Žižek and Ramadan were absolutely on the same side! That’s more interesting to me than a “face off.”

CM: Perhaps Žižek and Ramadan do not have important political differences regarding Egypt, or else their differences remain opaque. But as the situation plays out,

might differences in ideology not come to emerge and clash, and wouldn’t this actually be an important, politically salutary development?

SBM: I don’t think ideology is always so important. Žižek is against dictators because he lived under one. He knows what a dictator looks like. In one of the documentaries that came out of Iraq, a foot soldier in the American military says, “You know, if an armed guy who couldn’t speak my language broke into my house and got everybody in my family down on the floor, I could not see him as a liberator.” This soldier hardly needed a deep understanding of another culture, or a deep understanding of anything, really, to come to that conclusion. You are not a liberator if you invade a country and then come into a private home and terrify a family. You might think you are, just as Mubarak thinks he is a good leader—but you simply are not, and I think I can make that judgment. I do not think ideology comes first. Political judgment is not always, and does not always need to be, mediated by ideology. Often the judgment comes first, and I alter my ideology to allow it. We should be able to change our ideology, after all. We should be able to say, “We thought this, but look, this is happening. Maybe we were wrong.”

CM: And you think that the trouble with Marxism, or at least with the more orthodox Marxists, is that the ideology has hardened?

SBM: Right. The capacity to make a judgment is called *ijtihad* in Islam. Imams do that when they issue a fatwa. They say, “I’m looking at this particular human situation, and this is the judgment that I make.” The judgment that one imam makes, another may not agree with, and you never judge the same specific situation twice. Look at Lenin. He said, “We thought we would have the revolution first in Germany and the U.S., but we were wrong. We have to think again.” That is the mark of a non-dogmatic thinker. If they are not dogmatic, ideologies work, by which I mean that they can be effective ways to communicate collectively. As soon as they become dogmatic, however, ideologies are useless, whether or not they are secular, postmodern, premodern, multicultural, or whatever. It is a matter of judgment, and the leadership must consist of those who exercise good judgment. | **P**

Transcribed by Chris Mansour

1. See Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 83–222. In particular, see section three, “The Standpoint of the Proletariat.” Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/index.htm>>.

2. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 359.

3. Tariq Ramadan and Slavoj Žižek, interview by Imran Garda, *Riz Khan*, Al Jazeera English, February 11, 2011. Available online at <<http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/riz-khan/2011/02/2011238843342531.html>>.

Tripoli, continued from above

tional wealthy families, unimpeded, rather than by the upstart cronies cultivated under Marcos, himself a parvenu intolerable to the old Filipino elite. Furthermore, the rate of growth and development in the Philippines has stagnated, and is today much lower than it had been under Marcos. The wealth gap is much greater and poverty levels much worse at the bottom, and more endemically pervasive in the Philippines today than before. The Philippines remains, and will remain, just as swamped, in some ways worse than it was under Marcos.

Many of the former republics of the USSR after the collapse of Stalinism are as well.

But what is the point of saying so?

The potential further development of Libya after the passing of Qaddafi suggests something darker than what happened after “People’s Power” in the Philippines, in terms of violence and other forms of overt brutality—as opposed to the “softer” brutality that continues to prevail in the Philippines, as elsewhere. Libya may become more like Somalia. Or Yemen. Or Afghanistan or Iraq. Who knows?

If Qaddafi thought that the tsunamis that hit Japan would distract the U.S. from attacking his regime and allow suppression of the rebellion in Libya, he was mistaken. Rather, Qaddafi underestimated the global deluge of capital, at whose leading edge the U.S., for better or worse, operates. The flood was not to spare Qaddafi. It always stands poised to crash, cresting menacingly somewhere off shore. The rebels in Libya may have wished it to rain down on Qaddafi like a Biblical plague on the Pharaoh, tearing down the pride of his sinful glory. It will. But it may not spare them, either. There is little if any justice to history. Especially to a place like Libya, history happens.

Protest against the U.S./NATO/UN bombing of Libya is no less hopeless than Qaddafi is.

Qaddafi’s regime was, like Marcos’s in the Philippines—and the “totalitarian” regimes of the USSR and Eastern Europe, China, Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, etc. that Kirkpatrick and Reagan opposed—a “modernizing” project. Horrifically so. Perhaps this is what Kirkpatrick actually had in mind in her distinction between “authoritarian,” meaning more traditional, and “totalitarian” dictatorships—and why the former would end up being more benign than the latter. Perhaps.

Qaddafi moved the Berbers out of their traditional community in Ghadames into new apartment buildings. The ancient city—hallucinatory in its cavernous complexes—was left intact and preserved as a cultural museum. It still stands, alluring next to the decrepit hovels the modern high-rises have become. Perhaps the Berbers will return to their ancient city, evacuated by Qaddafi. But really it is no longer there, even if it remains in Libya. The deluge has not spared it. Nor will it. The only difference is how hard the wave might hit. | **P**



Leon Trotsky at his desk, circa 1918.

which begins with the emergence of the first organic cell from the laboratory of nature, where the physical and chemical properties of matter act. One who has learned to look back with such clarity on the past of the entire world, including the human society, animal and vegetable kingdom, the solar system and the surrounding infinity, will not search for keys to understanding the secrets of the universe in dilapidated “sacred” books, these philosophical fairy tales of primitive childishness. And one who does not recognize the existence of heavenly mystical powers, capable of arbitrary invasion into the personal or social life and its direction in one way or another, one who does not believe that the misery and suffering will find some higher reward in other worlds, will stand firmer and stronger on the ground, and will be more confident and courageous in looking to the material conditions of the society for foundations of his creative work. Materialist ideology not only opens wide a window to the entire universe, but it also strengthens the will. It alone makes modern man human. It is true that he still depends on grave material conditions, but he already knows how to overcome them and consciously participates in building a new society, based simultaneously on the highest technology and the highest solidarity.

Giving the proletarian youth a materialist education—this is the greatest challenge. To your magazine, which wants to participate in this educational work, I heartily wish success.

Leon Trotsky
February 27, 1922

Translated with the assistance of Yevgeniy Garmize and Alex Gonopolskiy

1. See my “Egypt, or, history’s invidious comparisons: 1979, 1789, and 1848,” *Platypus Review* 33 [March 2011].

Postcolonialism or postmodernism?

An interview with Susan Buck-Morss

Chris Mansour

On February 11, 2011—the day Hosni Mubarak resigned the office of President of Egypt—Chris Mansour interviewed Susan Buck-Morss, professor of political philosophy and social theory at Cornell University and author of The Origin of Negative Dialectics, Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left, and Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project, on behalf of the Platypus Review. What follows is an edited transcript of their conversation.

Chris Mansour: What were the stakes of introducing Critical Theory into a postmodern culture that widely considered its ideas obsolete? Are we in a similar climate today? How does Adorno’s critique of the authoritarian state speak to us now, after the dismantling of the welfare state over the last 30 years?

Susan Buck-Morss: First, I do not think of Critical Theory as something you apply or do not apply. I simply consider dialectics, as a philosophical tool, valid in the same way that mathematics, as a tool, is valid. I do not see it as belonging to a certain era. It is true that Marx and many Marxists argue that dialectics is the hinge that turns the critical analysis of the economy into a predictable scenario for the future, but that will not work, not today. I do not think a dialectical analysis of society will discover what Georg Lukács called the “subject-object of history”—the “new proletariat” or the necessary one. That is a strained argument to make in the present. The connection is broken. But it nonetheless seems theory can be beneficial for social change only if theory is attentive to a dialectical method, by which I simply mean a method that can embrace antithetical extremes without insisting that logic eliminate that antithesis. As Adorno said, the antithesis exists in reality. It is a contradictory reality that we cannot wish away in thought. Anytime we think we can, our thought is not capturing the world.

CM: Adorno also writes about the hope for a time in which dialectics are no longer necessary. Doesn’t this suggest that dialectics is a historically specific method, bound to capital?

SBM: By the time Adorno and Horkheimer wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is not clear whether they considered capital the only antagonistic social form, and thus the only one to which dialectical analyses apply. What Adorno says in the first line of *Negative Dialectics* is that philosophy lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. By that he really means that if Lukács had been right, and revolution had, at a certain moment in history, been able to resolve the contradictions of class society, then dialectical philosophy might not be the necessary mode of attack. But reading Adorno, one begins to think that a moment of complete absence of contradiction is never going to come—nor should it. With dialectics we are talking about a mode of critique that reveals a rational capacity of humans exceeding the degree of substantive rationality that we have been able to realize in the social world. So long as we can look at reality and say, “It could be better, it should be better,” critique is a necessary part of theory. Dialectical critique affirms some possibility in the world through a critical negation of the present state of things. The world is heading towards catastrophe, but it is also less likely to get there as you critique its present forms. You have to keep both levels of analysis, positive and negative, in play.

CM: Do these different levels—the world is doomed, the world might be saved—also track with a distinction between postmodernism and modernism? Towards the end of *The Dialectics of Seeing*, you write that “postmodern” and “modern” are not necessarily markers of an epoch, but markers of a political disposition.² Could you elaborate on that?

SBM: In brief, I think postmodernity is a conceptual dead end. I do not accept it as a stage of history. At best, “postmodern” is described by Fredric Jameson as being synonymous with late capitalism. But Jameson was enormously optimistic to equate late capitalism with postmodernity, as if this meant there still was a possibility of radical change. How late is late capitalism? It seems to me as if it is only noon. It just keeps going. Capital keeps feeding crises, and keeps restructuring itself when the crises are over. Nothing, it seems to me, is more true than the critique of capital as a system. Yet it is not as though we just criticize capital, and then it becomes obvious what we should do. We know that capitalism cannot solve certain problems of social inequality or the ecological limits to growth. We know that uncontrolled and unregulated, it inevitably pushes toward a greater gap between rich and poor. That is the so-called “free market” at work. There is nothing wrong with it from the neoclassical economist’s perspective, but there is something horrifying about the dominance of the profit-motive as the value of social life. “Postmodernity” has become, really, the word for the culture of capitalism today. My own feeling is that if you want to look for the seeds of what is presently, productively possible in social and cultural life, look to the postcolonial moment, rather than the postmodern Western moment.

CM: It is interesting that you make a distinction between the two, since it seems that “postmodern” and “postcolonial” are often treated more or less synonymously. How do they differ, in your view?

SBM: The problem for modern postcolonial artists, for example, was not “postmodernity;” it was how to be new and national at the same time. It was a problem of how to be modern without mimicking the West, because it was assumed that postcolonial artists could only be late arrivals to the places the Western artists already have gone. Instead, postcolonial artists produced a hybrid form of modernity with local traditions, which I find far more generative of what is possibly new and interesting

today in the art world than following the line of “postmodernity” which, in the art world today, is too often simply another word for “the market has control.” In the work of Wilfredo Lam, for example, one sees an artist who was not simply following Picasso, but actually working out a new problematic in the context of being an Afro-Cuban, Asian citizen of Cuba who then spent time in Paris before returning to Cuba to do his best work.

To take a more recent and dramatic example, there are crowds today out in the street in Cairo. Those brave people are not “finally becoming pro-democracy, just like us.” Quite frankly, we cannot match them today. We Americans can barely get a crowd out to defend democratic reform. The Egyptians are in the vanguard of democracy today. It is not as though they are finally catching up, while we are “postmodern” and “beyond democracy.” We never made it. The reasons why we never made it are precisely why they might: In Egypt there are strong, independent unions out on the streets today, threatening what may amount to something like a general strike in the country. They might be able to close down the Suez Canal, or at least they can threaten to do that. One-tenth of the world’s trade goes through that canal. Now that’s power. A small group can really screw up the works. But all of this is happening there. They are in the forefront, and are not at all “postmodern.”

Some elements of modernity were never realized, the fundamental one being the unresolved contradiction between political democracy and economic capitalism. Egypt, Turkey, and Tunisia are at the forefront of that fundamental contradiction. We have to look to them for guidance, to see what they can accomplish and where they might go wrong.

CM: For Egypt to be in the vanguard for democracy today and represent the project of completing modernity, wouldn’t these uprisings have to be a global phenomenon?

SBM: First, to clarify, I would say that Egypt is now in the vanguard of *socialist* democracy, because the workers are organized, and they are seeking to redistribute the wealth. And if you close down the Suez Canal, that is a global phenomenon, right? After the last economic crisis of capital, the movements that protested against structural readjustment in Greece, Spain, or Italy, all have reason to be in solidarity with the Egyptian protests. If you look at 1912, around the time of the Second International, there were a lot of demonstrations. At that time, unions were organized in national units that would send people to international conferences. The Second International and certainly the Third were organized nationally and tried—but had serious problems—forming an international organization on that basis. Now, from Tunis to Iran, Lebanon, and Syria, we already have international solidarity with what is happening in Egypt, but it centers on national goals—protesting the policies of their own, specific governments. That, to me, seems right, because you have to deal politically with your own country. What Egypt represents globally—international solidarity producing national political goals—is a better and potentially more successful model than the Second International. With Egypt we are talking about the autonomy of particular states and the universality or globality of the protest movement. This, in particular, is exciting.

The 1968 moment was also global in a way the Second International was not. It marked the beginning of an electronic network, inaugurated by live TV reporting, that allowed these movements to spread among people who were not in longstanding contact. With global media reporting, you didn’t need international meetings. That was the spontaneous part of 1968. However, when you get into a local context, you do need organization. You need the capacity to delineate a national territory as your domain of political action, because only as a citizen of a particular nation-state can you acquire power.

The turning point in media coverage was 1968, though we saw its power again with the fall of the Berlin Wall. After that, one by one, the leaders of the socialist countries fell out of power. Now it is the Arab countries who are producing a global effect at the level of a discourse of Islam, or a discourse of postcolonialism, shared by many different social groups. This is far better as a model today than organizing workers on the basis of what they have in common—namely, that they are workers. It doesn’t make much sense now, when so much affect is not around a category like “worker,” but ones like “youth,” “nation,” “ethnicity,” “women,” or whatever. Workers are one such organizational category, but not the exclusive vanguard.

CM: Looking back to when politics did center around the worker—or perhaps more precisely, the proletariat—do you think this focus was adequate then?

SBM: At a time when more people were organized as workers, they worked twelve-hour days, seven days a week. It was their life. Now we have a capitalist system that does not exploit the working class in the same crass way, or at least it primarily does so only locally. Instead it throws out superfluous workers, so you get rising unemployment, with pockets of the more traditional industrial working classes, in Western China, or in parts of Brazil and Mexico. These pockets do remain, but workers are now a much more nuanced, fragmented collective overall, with many different styles of life. Peasants have to play a part here, too, because they are still a huge part of the global working classes. Marx never had much hope for peasants’ capacity to act, but in contemporary times things are very different.

CM: The political role of peasants was a major point of discussion in the First and Second International, but it also received much attention in the student movements, with the rising influence of Maoism in the New Left during 1960s and 1970s. How, if at all, do the ways the student movement theorized the importance of peasants figure into political struggles today?

SBM: I hesitate to use the term “Maoism,” as it has such a bad name for anyone who knew what was going on in China at the time. But in India, for example, political awareness has been far more advanced than in the West concerning peasant exploitation under conditions of capitalism, and the potential political power of peasants. The key here is the old Marxist notion of ownership of the means of production. If you can produce the food for yourself and your family, you are ahead of things. South Korea is now buying up land in the Arab world and in Africa, claiming that the peasants who are pushed off the land can get other work. Perhaps so, but they will no longer own the means of production, with enormous social consequences.

But you spoke of the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s. What is left of this Left today? Intellectual debates have become scholastic. What are we in America, which has the best academic system in the world, doing right now? Often we are arguing over whether Deleuze’s notion of “planarity” is to be followed or whether we should be Agambenians and talk about *homo sacer*. These are perhaps politically powerful concepts, but they end up in such a hermetic discussion that they never get into the global public sphere.

CM: You have weighed in on political issues with greater public visibility, particularly the politics around Islam. How did you view the relationship of Islam to the Left in

in Mubarak’s last speech was a total disconnect between his presumption of sovereignty and the people’s understanding of him: On the split screen showing his speech juxtaposed to the angry demonstrators, the legitimacy of Mubarak’s sovereignty evaporated. The people became sovereign. Carl Schmitt was right: Sovereignty is the seat of legitimacy, not legality, and even for secular rulers, legitimacy has a religious aura. What causes that change, the assumption of legitimacy at the level of the people, is almost mystical. It is about our hope, our belief, in something more than we experience. That gets to the transcendent. Then we are not in the realm of secular science, which does not give this moment of enthusiasm any legitimacy, yet we feel it. In modernity the idea of “the people” itself is a religious, mystical idea.

CM: This makes me think of the idea of certain Marxists for whom utopia was something “out there,” something not yet in the present, but for whom utopia was secular. Does this understanding of utopia approach what you have been saying about Egypt?

SBM: No, because I *do* think we see it embodied, which is a very Christian notion. With Egypt we have the incarnation, the embodiment, of the idea of “the people.” I am not simply defending or affirming it. I’m just saying that even in the so-called secular era, it is still our reality, and I can



Anti-Mubarak protesters praying in Tahrir square, January 29, 2011.

2001, when you wrote *Thinking Past Terror*, and how do you see that relationship today?

SBM: What I called “political Islam” refers to a moment when the discourse of Islam became politically available as the basis for a powerful critique of the kind of modernity that Adorno and Horkheimer were also criticizing. What I have found increasingly important is the notion of “generations,” by which I don’t simply mean the moment of birth, one’s chronological age, but the moment in which one comes to critical, political awareness—the moment one enters history in this sense.

A number of figures seem to be part of a postcolonial generation dealing with a certain kind of critique of the West. Malcolm X, in 1964, dropped the Islamic nationalism and went for a more orthodox, universal notion of Islam. That year, Sayyid Qutb published his book *Milestones*, criticizing the established Islamic teachers and Nasser’s government at the same time. He also used Marxist concepts, talking about the “bloated capitalists,” and so on. Around this time, Mahmoud Mohammed Taha in Sudan was claiming that the Meccan revelations in the Qur’an advocate absolute equality among races and between men and women. He was accused of heresy and killed for it, but he was saying it nonetheless, and his theories are part of the legacy of political Islam. Then you have Ali Shariati translating Frantz Fanon into Farsi. All of these figures were critical of the idea that history necessarily went in a certain direction. Marx was just as guilty of projecting this telos as Adam Smith or Hegel. The Soviet Union as well as the U.S. adopted similar notions of history as progress, and with this came the assumption that “development” in an economic sense necessarily entailed “development” in a political and social sense.

CM: Seeing Islam as an integral struggle for the Left cuts against the critique of messianic visions of emancipation as well as against the secularism for which the Left has traditionally fought. Does the embrace of politicized Islam by leftists risk theocratizing leftism?

SBM: What you have to worry about is fundamentalism. Many capitalist economists are market fundamentalist, and they are as dangerous as Khomeini, if not more so. Orthodoxy, too—political or religious—is dangerous when it means there is only one right answer and all who disagree should be dismissed, or even die for being heretics or revisionists. That could be Stalin as well as Khomeini—the latter’s revolution, incidentally, was a classic French Revolution: It begins with a bloody overthrow and public executions, and then the attempt to sustain a reign of moral purity (as with Saint-Just). I do not see a radical break in strategy between these two revolutions. I do not think the Iranian Revolution was laudable, as Foucault did. What was bad about one was bad about the other.

We might consider today the political possibilities of the visibility of an event, in terms of the tactical power of non-violence in the face of violence, which was effective in the case of Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr., and which seems to be effective on the streets of Cairo. From this you begin to see the possibilities of a different kind of revolutionary practice that does not involve beheadings or the silencing of multiple voices.

I am not sure the West has ever been secular. I am not sure that any sovereign power can be. What we saw

become enthusiastic about it, too. Utopia is different, because it insists “I don’t see it now.” But when you look at those pictures of the protestors in Egypt, what excites you is that you do see people actually enacting an idea. There is a simply overwhelming promise of possibility. Politically it is the most sublime experience, and it is not graspable by a totally secular consciousness. Yet there is no denying this experience.

CM: There is almost an intoxication, it seems, to the excitement of this moment. It occurs to me that, to the amazement of the Left, Iran became a more repressive state in the aftermath of 1979, as did the newly independent Arab “socialist” republics in the 1950s–60s. Isn’t there good reason, then, to remain levelheaded? At what point does one need to sober his or her senses?

SBM: It is not always evident. Adorno was nervous about the student movement of the sixties, after all. This enthusiasm is not something I am simply affirming, but it is something I have experienced. How does one know when to trust such enthusiasm? For Adorno, any time euphoria makes a movement intolerant toward dissent, toward those who think differently, you have crossed a line into the wrong political space. I agree with that, essentially. It would be crazy, though, to say that the West is secular and therefore does not have this danger. Fascism was secular rule.

In addition to tolerating dissent, I would stress nonviolent tactics, which are utterly realistic in that they may even try to provoke the other side to violence. Nonetheless, it is about being prepared to be harmed rather than trying to harm others. The politics of nonviolence comes into its own with Gandhi. It emerges in the postcolonial context, at a time when cameras are there to record the violence of those who want to put down nonviolent demonstration. It is a new reality. Unlike the Old Left it does not simply take up arms.

CM: What about the anticolonial and postcolonial struggles that did pursue violent tactics?

SBM: Yes, there’s Fanon, Che Guevara, and so forth. But they may not represent the future of the Left. Nonviolent action that takes responsibility for all that it entails is rife with potential. The path to the future is in the way those millions of Egyptians refused fear and kept solidarity with all the citizenry, and even picked up after themselves at the demonstrations. They were so beautiful—showing a civic awareness and responsibility even as they put their lives on the line, and they won. That is very much in the tradition of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. That is the future, and it came from that postcolonial moment. Compared to that, George Bush’s policy of sending in the troops to “bring democracy to Iraq” seems like a dinosaur. The postmodern future would be the drones that are even more inhumane than if there were pilots in them.

CM: Much of what you have said hinges on how we understand the Left after postcolonial movements, but what of the Left prior to that? Could you elaborate on how the long history of the Left figures into this, for you?

SBM: The whole discourse of “the enemy” or “the class enemy” in the Old Left was about putting people against